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the Feminist Private/Public Discourse**

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## **The *Hijab* in Nigeria, the Woman's Body and the Feminist Private/Public Discourse**

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### **Abstract**

This essay explores Nigerian women's negotiation of public and private spheres through the meanings the *hijab* (Islamic head covering for women) has taken in different contexts, both liberating and limiting women. In the 1970s with the new oil economy, increasing migration to cities and the expansion of education for women, greater numbers of women began appearing in public spaces in urban areas. They began wearing the *hijab* to protect themselves from verbal assaults from men who objected to their presence in public. The impracticality of the *hijab* for rural women engaged in farming meant that the debate over the *hijab* remained an urban, middle-class debate. Even with urban women, the *hijab* was initially a choice, and one that gave them the freedom to move about in public. The author traces how the *hijab* eventually became compulsory. With the collapse of education, Izala (a reformist movement that seeks to enforce a strict application of shar'iah) and other Islamic organizations began to replace the state in offering services such as health care and education. Women who wished to access the services of these organizations were compelled to conform to their ideas of proper dress for women, which included the *hijab*. The author concludes by noting that the compulsory *hijab* has contributed to an erosion of diversity in Nigerian culture.

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## Introduction

A silent revolution in Muslim women's veils has been taking place in Nigeria over the last 30 years. Up to 1975 hardly any Muslim woman in northern Nigeria wore the *hijab*, while today one could not miss the growing number of women who wear it. By *hijab*, I do not differentiate among the many types of Arab/Middle Eastern veiling styles—*niqab*; *burka*; *al-amira*; *shayla*; *kehimar*; *chador*, etc. Instead, I draw contrasts between the Middle Eastern veiling, often tightly fastened around the face covering only the head or as far down as the heels, and the Nigerian types discussed below. While the *hijab* might seem exclusively Islamic, it is rather a cultural expression of the Middle East, which today is associated mostly with Muslims. From the mid 1970s, women in institutions of higher education in Nigeria began to wear the *hijab*, suggesting that in Nigeria the *hijab* has its origins in the values of the educated middle class in urban centers. By the late 1980s, its use had spread to other classes of urban women and gradually to some of their rural sisters, and by the 1990s, the *hijab* had begun to challenge official uniforms in the public service sectors such as the nursing profession and secondary schools. With the expansion of Islamic law in 1999, some of the Muslim states began to introduce the *hijab* as a compulsory part of girls' uniforms in state schools. The *hijab* is becoming visually louder and a compulsory part of female dressing in the public space. Yet, the *hijab* has not been examined critically in the academic discourse about women's access to that space. What does the dress change mean? How political and what kind of politics is it about?

This essay locates the politics of *hijab* as Muslim feminists have presented it, and understands it in the Nigerian politics of the woman's body and access to the public space. The woman's body here means the social perceptions of woman from the physiological, emotional and mental attributes of femininity. The essay highlights the link between the local context and the process of creating a global monotypic Islam and women's role in the public space. I propose that the most potent symbol of the monotypic process is the *hijab*.

## Types of Veils and Nigeria's Public Culture

Comparing the types of veils Nigerian women wore *before* and *after* the 1970s, I seek to understand why the change occurred and why in monotypic tone. What has changed about the woman's body that necessitated the increasing use of the *hijab*? The simple answer to the first part of the question is of course that nothing has changed in the woman's body. Therefore, the question we need to address is: what led to the change of perception of the woman's body? I propose that central to the change in perception are two concurrent political processes, one internal to Nigeria and the other external to it. Before analyzing the change, I will begin by examining the types of women's dressing in Nigeria before the 1970s.

The diversity of Nigeria means that there is a variety of traditional veiling types. Each veil type has its own history rooted in the cultural exchanges, technological capacity and classes of women in each community. I have chosen the Hausa veils called variously *kallabi*, *gyale* and *mayafi*, and the Kanuri *mandil* and *lafaya*. *Kallabi* is a scarf of approximately one square meter or less, folded into a triangle and firmly tied from the forehead and knotted at the back of the neck to cover only the head, sometimes only partially. An alternative to *kallabi* is *saro*, which has the same width as *kallabi* but is twice longer, less often used, covers only the head, and often only partially. *Gyale* is rarely less than 2 meters long, with varying widths but seldom exceeds a meter. It is used in many ways: either it is folded lengthwise and thrown back over the shoulders making a triangle on the chest; folded to a quarter of its full length and thrown on one shoulder; or it is spread out to its full length and width to cover from the head down or from the shoulder down, as far as the material can go. When it is adorned in the last style it becomes *mayafi*, meaning a throw around. The Kanuri use the *mandil*, which is the same size as *gyale* thrown loosely to cover the head. Although it has

become very popular since the 1970s, until that time only women who have made the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca used it. The *lafaya*, a material of similar length and width as the Indian *sari*, is wrapped around the body in a similar fashion as the Indian except that it is spread out to cover the shoulders from the back to the front. When necessary, for example against the sun, it is also used to cover the head. *Lafaya* is also sometimes worn only around the upper body excluding the head, and allowed to trail all the way to the ground. The *mandil* is not mentioned by name or described in any text before the twentieth century. However, Barth observed in 1851 that a woman of Kukawa, the capital of Borno, went “strolling about the streets with her gown trailing after her in the ground.”<sup>1</sup> This clearly refers to the Kanuri use of *lafaya* as an upper-body fashion accessory, a style they continued to exhibit into the 1970s.

In both the Hausa and the Kanuri women’s cultures hairdressing is an art form with some practical meanings, such that few women covered the head in either the nineteenth or the first decades of the twentieth centuries. European documents tend to show either sketches of women’s hairstyles or describe them rather than mention veils and scarves of any kind, including the *kallabi* and the *mandil*. The descriptions of women’s hairstyles indicate that most women went about with the open head. European travellers have described the hair braids called *doka* for the Hausa and *kāla yasku*, *goto* and *shangalci* for the Kanuri, decorated with silver pins and hair dyeing.<sup>2</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, sketches and photographs show Hausa women at work wearing *saro*.<sup>3</sup> Both *gyale* and *lafaya* were used mainly when going out on occasions other than farm or farm-related work. When veils were used, married women adopted either the upper-body veil excluding the head or the head-covered option purely as matter of personal choice, while girls and divorcees tended to use neither.

I know from personal experience too that most Kanuri women went bareheaded up to the 1970s. By the 1980s the attitude of men to the open head began to change and they began making derogatory comments with Islamic connotations on women who went bareheaded on the streets. Around the same time, I was accosted at a mosque in a Hausa area for not wearing the *hijab*. By the late 1980s, there was a tendency for men to be brazen towards women who did not wear the *hijab* and openly hostile towards teenage girls and women who did not wear any veil at all. Why are the dressing styles of women important in the discussion of the contemporary politics in Nigeria? We may disagree about whether the changes are liberating or oppressing, but we cannot dispute the fact of a change in how women access the public space. Hence the imperative is for us to explore why and how the change has occurred.

The limited use of the veil in previous centuries and the increasing use of the *hijab* since the 1970s have two possible explanations at least. Firstly, it might indicate different perceptions of the woman’s body between the pre- and post 1970s among Nigerian Muslims. Secondly, it might indicate that Muslim women have had a different standing in the political processes before 1970s, and another since then.

I believe the changes in veiling style indicate a renegotiation in context of a continuously increasing presence of women in the urban public spaces. The *hijab* indicates women’s persistence of pursuing their right to be in the public space. It is simplistic to

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<sup>1</sup> Barth, H., *Barth’s Travels in Nigeria: extracts from the journal of Heinrich Bart’s travels in Nigeria 150-1855*, Select & edit. by AHM Kirk-Greene, London, Ibadan & Accra OUP, 1962, p. 164.

<sup>2</sup> For the description of *goto*, see A. Shultze, *The Sultanate of Bornu*, London, Frank Cass, 1968 (1913), p. 174. *Kāla yasku* is the hairstyle for girls, which is changed with a special ceremony after the first year of marriage. For both Hausa and Kanuri hairstyles see Kirk-Greene, *Barth’s Travels in Nigeria*, pp. 109, 158 and 164.

<sup>3</sup> See Hauwa Mahdi, *Gender & Citizenship: Hausa women’s political identity from the Caliphate to the Protectorate*, (Gothenburg, 2006) for a few photographs. Also see, Martin S. Kisch, *Letters and Sketches from Northern Nigeria*, (London, 1910), pp. 44, 58 & 92.

explain the change of adorning the *hijab* as a non-political form of Islamic reawakening since the local veils are just as good. Rather the *hijab* indicates a step in men's determination to seclude women and exclude them from the political process. Thus as Fatima Mernissi concludes from her study of Islamic spatial rules in Morocco, the change in Nigeria also "reflects the division between those who hold authority and those who do not, those who hold spiritual powers and those who do not."<sup>4</sup> As I will show in the subsequent sections, the process reflects both a renegotiation of women's role in politics, especially in the state public sector, and their status in it. For, in the 1970s women had begun to enter the public sector in larger numbers, competing for positions of authority with men in institutions of decision making. In addition, during 1979-1982, the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) governments of Kano and Kaduna States had changed the education policy to increase the volume and quality of girls' and adult women's education. The governments had abandoned the elitist secondary school boarding system for day schooling, which enabled them to increase the number of schools, enroll more girls in all levels of education and invest in literacy classes for adult women. This meant an upsurge of teenage girls and women in the streets of urban centres of the two states in daytime. The rise of the *hijab*, at the same time these changes in the urban workplace were taking place, is not accidental. Among other reasons, the *hijab* was a means for Muslim women to participate in the urban work place without men reducing women's contribution to their sexuality. The *hijab* could also be seen as a male demand on women, a compromise women were prepared to make, to enable them to access the urban spaces previously dominated by men.

### Women's Western Education and the Public Space

The general histories of the Sokoto Jihad and of the Caliphate are well researched.<sup>5</sup> But recent studies highlighting gender issues in the encounter between colonial rule and the elite of the Caliphate demonstrate that although a thread from the past could be discerned in the present, adorning the *hijab* can be linked more with the politics of the colonial encounter than with the heritage of the Sokoto Caliphate.<sup>6</sup> The education of Muslim women has been given the least and the last consideration in both the distant and recent pasts. The Christian missions, the leading educators, were not even allowed to open schools in Muslim areas throughout most of the colonial period.<sup>7</sup> Western education in Northern Nigeria was therefore solely a project of the colonial government and the emirs—if and when they deemed it a worthy investment. According to Umar, the education policy envisaged by F. D. Lugard came as part of the British policy of containment and surveillance of Islam.<sup>8</sup> After a brief period of negotiation with the government, the emirs were keen to open schools for boys with "claims of birth."<sup>9</sup> Thus, Lugard's framework of cooperating with the emirs to establish schools has an intrinsic class dimension in addition to the Islamic containment objective. Tibendarana rightly observes that aristocratic boys were educated with the

<sup>4</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: male-female dynamics in Muslim society*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), 2003 (1975), p.138.

<sup>5</sup> Yusufu Bala Usman, (ed.), *Studies in the History of the Sokoto Caliphate*, Lagos, 1979; Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, London, 1977; and Mervyn Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth: the life and times of the Shehu Usman dan Fodio*, New York, 1973.

<sup>6</sup> Mahdi, *Gender & Citizenship*; Beverly B. Mack & Jean Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asama'u scholar scribe*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 2000. Boyd, Jean, *The Caliph's Sister Nana Asma'u 1793–1865: Teacher, Poet and Islamic Leader*, London, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> See, *CBMS/IMC Archives, Boxes 269 & 270*, School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS), London, for the Mission/colonial government conflicts. Walter Miller, *Have we Failed in Nigeria?* London, 1954. Edmund P. T. Crampton, *Christianity in Northern Nigeria*, Dublin, 1975.

<sup>8</sup> Muhammad S. Umar, *Islam and colonialism: intellectual responses of Muslims of Northern Nigeria to British rule*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2006, p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Trevor, "Education of Moslem Hausa Women from Sokoto," *MSS. Afr. S. 1755 (79A)*, Rhodes House, Oxford, p. 90.

intention of incorporating them into the Native Authority (NA) bureaucracy.<sup>10</sup> Girls on the other hand, were never considered fit to hold public offices. Thus, while the government commenced the education of boys as early as 1910, girls' schools did not begin until after 1928. When it started, the class dimension was also an issue as it was in the case of boys. Booker complained in 1937 that "the girls in the list sent to me were unsuitable as they were of very low grade. I want girls of good family..."<sup>11</sup>

The case for girls' education is much more complex than researchers have presented it. Colonial educational policy was intended to maintain men's literary advantage over women, one of the pillars of patriarchy. The opening of girls' schools in Kano and Katsina was contentious, contrary to Tibendarana's assertion.<sup>12</sup> Colonial officers did not wish to put on record what transpired between them and the emirs on the subject.<sup>13</sup> Note too that by the time the opening of girls' schools was negotiated between the two sides, the suspicion of the emirs against colonial rule had, according to Lt. Governor Alexander, more or less dissipated.<sup>14</sup> In Kaita's words, a graduate of one of the five women's teachers colleges in 1951, "men have used a false interpretation of Islam to subjugate women and restrict their education."<sup>15</sup> Muslim girls' education was a subject of a more intense debate and negotiation between the few British officers who wanted to implement it and the aristocracy who opposed it.<sup>16</sup> The idea that the emirs objected to western education for fear of conversion to Christianity is a simplification of a problem that neglects other factors, such as class and gender. Muslim scholars and British educators stood side-by-side in favour of women's education while the aristocracy and the colonial officers stood together against it; hence a political explanation has to be sought rather than a simple religious explanation. One cannot but agree with Jean Trevor's conclusion that the emirs and most officers saw education and its quality as a medium of reinforcing the established social hierarchy; and therefore access to it should depend on one's family background.<sup>17</sup> According to her, Lugard saw the value of girl's education in terms of affording "youths [men] ... wives who can share their thoughts and sympathise in and understand their work ... [and] in forming the character of her child."<sup>18</sup> The Superintendent of Education, J. D. Clarke, observed that "students [men] were accompanied to the Higher College by illiterate girls who performed the duties of servant and wife."<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the importance of maintaining the patriarchal structure was a significant reason for men's opposition to girls' education. Consequently, when a policy was developed, it was designed to prepare girls only for house and husband keeping,<sup>20</sup> a policy that remained in effect up to the 1960s. This policy objective is confirmed further by advertisements for

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Kazenga Tibendarana, "The beginnings of girls' education in the Native Administration schools in Northern Nigeria, 1930-1945" in, *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 26, 1985, p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Trevor, "Education of Moslem Hausa Women from Sokoto," p. 56

<sup>12</sup> Tibendarana, "Beginnings of girls' education," p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> See, Miss Catherine Dinnick-Parr. MSS. Afr. S. "Education of Moslem Hausa Women from Sokoto" in, *MSS. Afr. S. 1889*, pp. 105-108. A. R. Allen, "Offering benefits on the land – the colonial education services in NN 1945-60" in, *MSS. Afr. S. 103 s 1 (9)*.

<sup>14</sup> "Memo by Lt. Governor N. P." 7<sup>th</sup> July 1932 in, *MSS. Brit. Emp. S. 276 16/6* Lethem, Rhodes House, Oxford.

<sup>15</sup> Mrs H. I. Kaita, "Women's education in the Northern States of Nigeria 1950-1972" in, Jean Trevor, *MSS. Afr. S. 1755 (79A)* 37.

<sup>16</sup> Trevor, "Education of Moslem Hausa Women from Sokoto," 1755 (79A)

<sup>17</sup> Trevor, *MSS. Afr. S. 1755 (79 O)* 15.

<sup>18</sup> Trevor, *MSS. Afr. S. 1755 (79A)* 98.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95-6.

<sup>20</sup> See the teaching curriculum in the 1940s in Gladys Plummer, "Miscellaneous reports and memo on female education", 1945-47 in, *MSS. Afr. S. 1322*, Rhodes House, Oxford, p. 33.

higher education and jobs where women were not expected to apply.<sup>21</sup> In the 1960s, the government was forced to increase the intake of girls in secondary schools.<sup>22</sup> The impact of these girls on the psyche of this patriarchal society is much more than their limited numbers would suggest. These girls and, the boys of their generation who did not join the army to fight in the Nigerian civil war c. 1967-1970, filled the vacant positions in the lower echelons of the regional government,<sup>23</sup> from where they began their struggle for the higher positions. Women's role in the bureaucracy in that era explains at least partially men's verbal violence against them and their adoption of *hijab* as a refuge.

Men's hostility to women's entry into the public space is especially noticeable in the educational sector. In spite of the hostility, many girls went for higher education. They have later "married beneath" their class to men who would allow them to work.<sup>24</sup> According to Kaita, many girls forced into marriage against their will have found it preferable to go into prostitution than remain married to men they care nothing for. In contrast, Abdullahi observes that the girls "saw their future role as wives and mothers and not as workers in an office or profession."<sup>25</sup> Abdullahi's assertion does not fit my experience of boarding school. Although there were girls who would rather not be in school, the vast majority wanted an education and envisaged their future as workers.

Overall, women's struggle for inclusion in the public space in general has to focus on men's attitude to them. That attitude is an important factor in the decisions women took about veiling. Men's language against women's presence on the scene has often been expressed in sexually or psychologically degrading terms, claiming that women are using their bodies or losing their minds. This attitude also forms the beginning of the new perception of the woman's body and the delimitation of her presence in the public space. Thus, women's resort to the *hijab* can partially be understood as a liberating experience, of changing their appearance to avoid the insults.

### The Woman's Body

What led to the change in the perceptions of the woman's body? Increased urbanisation and 'modernisation' of the society is one explanation; and another is expansion of the middle class and its influence in the public sector right at time women began to occupy positions in that sector. During the global oil crisis of 1974 the Nigerian government raked-in more wealth than it had ever, raising the per capita and buying power of Nigerian middle class, income in the urban centres, and "rent-seeking activities,"<sup>26</sup> thereby encouraging a massive rural-urban migration in search of better living conditions. The oil-dependent state ceased to pay attention to farming. Women's role in farming, as indeed of men, became less vital to maintenance of the family.

Women formed part of that wave of migrants into the towns doing all kinds of work no longer limited to the state bureaucracy. In other words, increased wealth from oil enabled the middle class to propagate its newly acquired values in the Muslim community, one of which was to seclude women from the urban public sector. If they could not seclude women

<sup>21</sup> *Eastern Region of Nigeria Gazette*, No. 26, Vol. 8, pp. 258-9. *Eastern Region of Nigeria Gazette*, No. 37, Vol. *Eastern Region of Nigeria Gazette*, No. 37, Vol. 8, p. 380. *Eastern Region of Nigeria Gazette*, No. 59, Vol. 8, p. 714.

<sup>22</sup> Chief Information Officer for Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Internal Affairs, "Government explains true position" in, *Nigerian Citizen*, July 23, 1958, p.6. For actual figures of girls in secondary schools see, Haroun Al-Rashid Adamu, *The North and Nigerian Unity: some reflections on the political, social and educational problems of Northern Nigeria*, Zaria, 1973, pp.38-39.

<sup>23</sup> Ramatu Abdullahi, *Self-concept and cultural change among the Hausa*, Ibadan, 1986, p. 62. North Central State is the present Kaduna and Katsina States.

<sup>24</sup> Trevor in, *MSS. Afr. S. 1755 (79A)*, Oxford, p. 82.

<sup>25</sup> Ramatou Abdullahi, *Self-concept and cultural change* 1986, p. 63.

<sup>26</sup> Alan Richards, "Oil booms and agricultural development" in, Michael J Watts, (ed.), *State, Oil and Agriculture in Nigeria*. Berkeley, Institute of International Studies: 1987, 85 -109.

in the house the seclusion could be borne in mobility – the *hijab*. The woman was no longer judged and valued by her potential labour, but her aesthetic/sexual roles. This change was facilitated by the growing accessibility of television and video films in which the woman's physical/sexual body is highlighted. Her decreasing role in tilling the soil in reality and the images films conjure up are those of women's capacity to think and act independently, and for men a fear of the collapse of patriarchy. Wearing the *hijab* for this reason is no longer a matter of women wanting to protect themselves against men's hostility, but also of a man's demarcation of his ownership of her body. No other man, who could be a candidate for her hand, should gaze at her. For that ownership to be realised none of the Nigerian veils, at least not in the way they had been adorned before, would have been adequate; it had to be the *hijab*.<sup>27</sup>

Urbanisation, education, petro-wealth and the new roles women came to play in the 1970s can explain the rise of veiling among women, but they can explain the use of the *hijab* only partially. For a fuller understanding of the change from the Nigerian veils to the Middle Eastern *hijab* we have to analyze conflicts between the Islamic organisations, their ideological leanings and international affiliations.

### Islamic Organisations in Contemporary Politics

A few years after independence, a number of religious organisations emerged which interpreted the socio-economic problems of Nigeria in religious terms.<sup>28</sup> Each of these organisations has either a formal or non-formal women's wing which carries the message of the main body to women. While in 1980 there were only 54 Islamic non-governmental organisations (NGOs) of the total 1350 in Nigeria, they had risen by the year 2000 to 523 and 4028, respectively.<sup>29</sup> The conflicts between Sufi leaders and an emerging opposition in the person of Alhaji Abubakar Gumi and their followers are an important stage in the politicisation of religion and the *hijab*.<sup>30</sup> Although leaders of the religious movements pursued their ideological battles at the intellectual plain, their followers often slugged it out on the streets.<sup>31</sup> As the religious movements got more engaged in politics and social work by opening clinics and schools, more and more of their women attendants and clients began wearing the *hijab*. Izala has declared many Nigerian "customs and traditions" un-Islamic, among them the traditional dressing and veils.<sup>32</sup>

As Loimeier points out, with the first military coup, the death of Sir Ahmadu Bello (the Premier of Northern Nigeria in 1966), and the ensuing civil war, Abubakar Gumi was left without political protection, but also with an opportunity to radicalise the Muslim

<sup>27</sup> Note too that today many Christian churches in Nigeria also seek to impose stringent dress codes on women by forbidding their women members to wear trousers or dresses that do not go below the knee.

<sup>28</sup> In sequential order the first is the *Jamat Nasril Islam* (JNI –Group for the Victory of Islam) in 1962, *Kungiyar Jama'ati Ahlis Sunna* 1977, *Jamat Izala al-Bida wa Iqamat al-Sunna* in 1978 and the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) 1980. For details see, Roman Loimeier, "Clashes between Islamists and Sufis and its outcome: the case study of Yan Izala and the Sufis in Nigeria" in, [www.e-prism.org/images/Islam in Africa newsletter - No6 - November 2006. pdf](http://www.e-prism.org/images/Islam%20in%20Africa%20newsletter%20-%20No6%20-%20November%202006.pdf), Muhammad S. Umar, "Changing Islamic Identity in Nigeria from the 1960s to the 1980s: from Sufism to anti-Sufism" in, Louis Brenner (ed.) *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, London, 1993, pp. 154-178. John Hunwick, "An African case study of political Islam: Nigeria" in, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 524, November 1992, pp. 143-155.

<sup>29</sup> M. A. Mohamed Salih, "Islamic NGOs in Africa: The Promise and Peril of Islamic Voluntarism" an occasional paper : Centre of Studies University of Copenhagen, March 2002 in, [www.teol.ku.dk/CAS/](http://www.teol.ku.dk/CAS/)

<sup>30</sup> For the conflicts between the Sufi's and their opponents see, Louis Brenner (ed.), 1993. Rüdiger Seesemann, "The Takfir debate: sources for the study of a contemporary dispute among African Sufis: part 1: The Nigerian arena" in, [www.hf.uib.no/smi/sa/09/9](http://www.hf.uib.no/smi/sa/09/9)

<sup>31</sup> Seesemann, pp. 69-70. For the conflicts between Islamic organisations see, Roman Loimeier, "Clashes between Islamists and Sufis."

<sup>32</sup> Loimeier, 2006, p.6. Umar, 1993, p. 157-8.



public.<sup>33</sup> Just as the civil war began, Gumi got airtime on Kaduna radio, which expanded his audience in addition to the many pamphlets and newspaper articles he wrote. Today, many of Nigeria's over five hundred Islamic NGOs have hit the cyber space, including women's sites.<sup>34</sup> The proliferation of Islamic movements and their increasing occupation of the public space have seen the growth of violent sectarian conflicts in equal measure. By the end of the 1970s, the focus of the religious movements had shifted from challenging each other to challenging the Nigerian state.

Gumi saw the return to civilian rule as an opportunity, equating voting to a jihad:

It is the duty of men and women to take up arms... Well [by analogy to this], it is [a duty] to cast a vote. Now since this [voting] will be beneficial to oneself and moreover beneficial to the Muslim community, it is Satan who prevents them from going out... As long as a man's wife covers her body properly... if this is not done, even to the point of letting unbeliever to predominate, then what is our positions? ... This is what makes me say that politics is more important than prayer... With politics one stands for prayer and worship together, whereas prayer is only part of this...<sup>35</sup>

Gumi's statement reflects Muslim feminists' position that Islamic texts have always been subjects of exegetic reinterpretation. The first *hijab* wearers were initially the followers of Gumi. In complex processes of allegiances, trade-offs and cross-carpeting that began in 1975 in the context of drafting a new constitution for Nigeria's return to civilian rule, Gumi saddled Muslim women with the moral responsibility of the group and a duty to vote for a Muslim president. Gumi had renounced Sufism since the 1940s,<sup>36</sup> and was silent about the right of Muslim women to vote in both the 1959 and the 1964 elections. Only in 1978 did he begin to seek women's inclusion in the electoral process.

The 1970s are important for Muslim women not only because of Gumi and the political processes of the Second Republic. As the fight by the Muslim elite to include a *shari'a* court of appeal in the constitution raged on, Ibrahim Yaqoub EL-Zakzaki appeared on the political scene. In 1980, he launched the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) which added an Iranian-Shi'i dimension to political Islam in the country. An intense competition for support from ordinary Muslims has since ensued. As political parties seek support through their programs, so do the Islamic NGOs. Even more important to the issue of the *hijab* than the political polemics is the concrete inputs the organisations are making in ordinary women's lives. Since the Nigerian governments at all levels have neglected the provision of basic services that facilitate individual and social security, these movements have turned that failure to their advantage. Izala and IMN model their interpretation of Islam with respect to social conduct on the Saudi-Wahhabi and Iranian doctrines respectively.<sup>37</sup> Engaged in adult and child education where the state has failed, they have also exerted pressure on women to wear the *hijab* as a precondition for receiving services. IMN

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<sup>33</sup> Roman Loimeier, "Islamic Reform and political change: the example of Gumi and the *yan izala* movement in Northern Nigeria" in, David Westerlund & Eva Evers Rosander (eds.), *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounter between Sufis and Islamists*, Uppsala, 1997, p. 290. For details of the development of the media see, Yusuf M. Adamu "Print and Broadcast media in northern Nigeria" in, [www.kanoonline.com/downloads/Media](http://www.kanoonline.com/downloads/Media)

<sup>34</sup> [www.fomwan.org/](http://www.fomwan.org/), [www.ui.edu.ng/mssn/sistersCorner](http://www.ui.edu.ng/mssn/sistersCorner), [www.mujaahidahplanet.com/](http://www.mujaahidahplanet.com/) & [www.nigerianmuslims4marriage.com/](http://www.nigerianmuslims4marriage.com/) .

<sup>35</sup> Loimeier, 1997, p. 293.

<sup>36</sup> Umar, 1993, p. 159.

<sup>37</sup> Ousmane Kane, *Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria: a study of the society for the removal of innovations and reinstatement of tradition*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2002, pp. 123-125. For IMN's inspirational source, one only needs to visit its homepage at [www.islamicmovement.org](http://www.islamicmovement.org).

asserts that one of its successes “is the formation of formal Islamic institutions and the uses of accurate veils (*hijabs*).”<sup>38</sup>

One Sufi aspect applicable in ordinary living is its appreciation of individuality in worship – what Umar has called “personal style.”<sup>39</sup> This Sufi perception of Islam had enabled women’s traditional African dressing style to survive over the centuries. Since the Nigerian state has abdicated its responsibility to the citizenry, Izala and IMN through the services they provide, have acquired a social platform for launching their political strategies. These organisations compel women to abandon the local styles in favour of the Wahhabi and Iranian dress codes, thereby directing Nigerian Muslims towards a monotypic view of gender in the public space.

The expansion of Islamic laws in 1999 has also imposed these dress codes. The Kano state governor, Mallam Ibrahim Shekarau, reiterated his determination to extend the *hijab* beyond government schools into private ones. He says, “such laws are currently being operated in our universities, go to BUK [Bayero University Kano] for example you can see lots of bill boards sensitising on the students about decent dress.”<sup>40</sup> The state governments implementing the new Islamic codes and other institutions financed by the Nigerian state are delegitimizing women’s traditional dressing styles, with the important consequence that girls or women who do not adhere to the codes, would not have access to education and other basic services in these states.

Does wearing the *hijab* have any political significance? Not necessarily, unless women are coerced into it or denied equal services because of not wearing *hijab*. The conditions attached to obtaining the services offered by states and private organisations amounts to coercion. Additionally, the religious organisations have ideological leanings, which they seek to impose on women in Nigeria. With a barrage of indoctrination through the media, induction in schools and Islamist state laws, and other instruments of control, women’s dressing is being steered towards the monotypic codes.

### **Muslim Women’s Perceptions in Nigeria**

A self-defence mechanism for women is the creation of associations from which platform they can together seek social freedom and political inclusion. This form of struggle was made possible with the democratisation process of the late 1970s and the increase of women in the urban workplace. The religious organisations also draw their adherents from the same pool of urban women and youths.<sup>41</sup> What do women say about Islam, and the *hijab*? Do they see the *hijab* as a political symbol? What questions do women activists and organisations raise about the nature of interpreting Islamic texts and its role in Nigerian politics? These questions raise ideological and practical issues. Most Nigerian feminists tend to address both sides of the problem, but seldom connect applicability to the cultural diversity in the country.

Fatima L. Adamu discussed the three possible positions from which the Qur’an and the practices of the prophet can be interpreted regarding the role of women in politics, namely: 1) Islam has entrusted men as overseers of women’s affairs so they do not need to be active themselves—she quotes the relevant texts supporting this position; 2) there is precedence for the participation of women in the political and textual history of Islamic societies, suggesting women should be free to participate; and 3) women can participate in politics and be elected as long as they are old and do not occupy the highest offices. She rightly points out the discontent of Muslim women against the male politicians who seek to

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<sup>38</sup> “The Declaration of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria: a prosperous silver jubilee” in, [www.islamicmovement.org](http://www.islamicmovement.org).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 164.

<sup>40</sup> Yusha’u Adamu Ibrahim (Reporter), “Compulsory hijab affects only Muslim students” in, [www.dailytrust.com](http://www.dailytrust.com), 7 May, 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Loimeier, 2006.

discredit their candidacy at election times.<sup>42</sup> Two issues can be observed. Firstly, although the first two positions do not mention women's dressing, most Islamic organisations expect their female members to adorn particular dressing deemed Islamic. The second issue is about the location of bio-sexual identity in arguments that justify women's exclusion from the political space.

In 2002, the leader of the Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN), Bilkisu Yusuf, published an article in response to the pressure being exerted on women in the *sharia* states.<sup>43</sup> She writes, "...one of the states toyed with the idea of forcing men to grow beards. Perhaps this will allow us to measure their piety ... Two other *sharia* states also toyed with the idea of imposing a uniform of plain cotton *hijab* on women, with different colours reflecting the marital status of the wearer." Yusuf concludes: "If *hijab* uniforms are to be imposed on women, it should also be imposed on men with different colours reflecting the number of wives they have or whether they are single. Muslim women would also find this information handy..."<sup>44</sup> Yusuf's presentation indicates clearly that the political intent of the *hijab* is well understood. The governments have since imposed the *hijab* on girls and by underhanded methods forced it on women too. In the 1970s the *hijab* could be seen as liberating since women made the decision to adorn it. In the twenty-first century the headgear symbolises the oppression of women in the public space, an imposition by Islamist NGOs and Islamist governments.

Other NGOs such as the BAOBAB for women's human rights and the Sisters in Islam in Malaysia (SIS) seem to have begun this move in their activist approaches. One of SIS's leaders, Kaprawi Norhayati, observes that in Malaysia, as in other Muslim countries, Islamists are making women "the benchmark of ... [their] proof of success". As the government succumbed to the pressure of the Islamist movements, women found themselves at the "short end of the stick." SIS has adopted a strategy of re-reading Islamic texts, "demystifying" *sharia* and "illustrating the rich 'human interventions' ..., influenced by human reasoning and cultural contexts."<sup>45</sup> The difference between BAOBAB and SIS and the many Muslim women's movements in Nigeria is the latter groups' denominational association. Both BAOBAB and SIS work across ethnic and/or religious boundaries to secure the interests of women in the public space. The Muslim women's organisations in Nigeria, who are associated with the male-dominated NGOs on the other hand, seem restricted by the denominational association of the mother organisation. Many articles in IMN sisters' forum and the academic forum show no attempt to conduct a reason-based debate.<sup>46</sup> Comparing these positions to those of SIS or the intellectual debates about Islam, one cannot but agree with Yusuf's contention that politics and extra-judicial violence in Nigeria are breeding intellectual poverty among Muslims who are afraid to be critical for fear of being castigated as a heretic.<sup>47</sup>

Other Muslim writers perceive biology as a justifiable basis for women's exclusion from the political space. According to Doi, who taught in Nigeria in the 1970s, a woman cannot head a state because, "there are complicated issues to be handled, both religious and political, ... [which] may be difficult for a woman to handle..., taking into consideration the

<sup>42</sup> Fatima L. Adamu, "Politicisation of Gender and the Election of Muslim Women into Political Leadership in Hausa Society, Northern Nigeria" in, [www.gwsafrica.org/](http://www.gwsafrica.org/)

<sup>43</sup> FOMWAN is an umbrella organisation of many Muslim women's associations.

<sup>44</sup> Bilkisu Yusuf, "Women and empowerment in Islam" in, [www.weeklytrust.com](http://www.weeklytrust.com), 13 December, 2002, p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> Kaprawi Norhayati, "The experiences of Sisters in Islam in facing the challenges of gender justices" a paper for, A World in Transition: New Challenges for Gender Justice at the Biannual (Gender and Development Network, Sweden) GADNET Conference in collaboration with Centre for Women's Development Studies, India (CWDS).

<sup>46</sup> See, "Position of women in Islam" & "women in Islam" by Malama Maimuna Hussein; and "Islamic doctrines on women's issues" and "Zahra" by Fatima Binta in, [www.islamicmovement.org/sisters.htm](http://www.islamicmovement.org/sisters.htm),

<sup>47</sup> Yusuf, 13 December, 2002, p. 7.

strict code of modesty and conduct given by the religion of Islam and the biological make-up of a woman”.<sup>48</sup> Thus, women’s physiological and psychological make-ups are limitations to their sense of judgement.<sup>49</sup> The inadequacy of the woman’s biology comes in many forms and is argued for by both sexes wherever convenient. Ndagi equates being a woman to house and husband keeping, a point of view shared by many.<sup>50</sup> Kabir’s argument seems to reveal the dilemma that besets the discourses of Islam and women in Nigeria. She condemns women’s movements that seek gender equality, the destruction of the class system and of patriarchy.<sup>51</sup> The dilemma is not exclusive to Nigeria, which would explain why Waddud was asked, “Why can’t we say we are working for gender justice from a human rights perspective instead of our earlier claim of working from a gender-inclusive Islamic perspective?”<sup>52</sup> The dilemma indicates a need for women to adopt an exegetic engagement, extricating the spirit of the Qur’an from the imperfections of human word and agency, and locating their faith in their cultural histories. The process might have begun.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

The presence or absence of Nigerian women in general and of Muslim women in particular in the public space cannot be seen as a given or unchanging. The challenge is to analyse and explain why and how any particular dimension of the public space acquires significance at certain times, in the persistent reappraisals that form part of social discourses. This essay explores the significance of *hijab* in the evolution of politics and the bureaucracy as dimensions of the public space. The *hijab* has a very short history in Nigeria. Throughout the last half a century, the Muslim elite have resorted to either Islam or shari’a law as a rallying point for ethnic and male solidarity. Pitching their tent on the *hijab* is one of those points on which they hope to consolidate their alliance with the religious elite and male votes for their political ends. Men have been resistant to an interpretation of the texts that will legitimise women’s presence in that space. I argue that this exclusion is a dimension of Nigerian politics and the international affiliations of religious groups. Wearing the *hijab* is a demand that can only be required of urban women, because of the nature and location of their work. It cannot be demanded of women physical labourers that they should wear any kind of clothing that could hinder their work. Thus the demand on urban women is not merely about their presence in the public space in general, but about political power and the calculations and interests of elite groupings in that space. My contention is that the *hijab* symbolises a progression of the contestations of power whereby men seek to dictate the terms of women’s role in politics and in the bureaucracy, since along with the *hijab* came a new rhetoric for women to be meek. The stakes have been raised since the introduction of civilian governance in 1999 with state governments and religious organisations forcing women to wear the *hijab*.

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<sup>48</sup> ‘Abdur Rahman I. Doi, *Woman in Shari’ah (Islamic Law)*, London: 1994,136.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>50</sup> Dr Muhammad Umaru Ndagi, “Which comes first: Your job or your husband?” in, [www.dailytrust.com](http://www.dailytrust.com), 18 Nov.- 24 Nov., 2006. Also see, Rabi Sanusi, “The role of the Muslim woman in the 15<sup>th</sup> century of Hijra” in, Rahmatu Abdullahi (ed.), *The Muslim Woman: challenges of the 15<sup>th</sup> century of Hijra*, Ilorin, 1988, p.82.

<sup>51</sup> Zainab Sa’id Kabir, “Women liberation movement: myths and realities” in, Rahmatu Abdullahi (ed.), 1988, p.130-131.

<sup>52</sup> Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: women’s reform in Islam*. Oxford: One World, 2006, 191.

<sup>53</sup> Hajiya Bilkisu, “Political relevance of women in Islam” in, Weekly Trust, 3-9 August 2001, [www.gamji.com](http://www.gamji.com).

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